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## **Minimally invasive endodontics -**

### **A new diagnostic system for assessing pulpitis and subsequent treatment needs**

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## **Abstract**

Developments in our understanding of pulp biology and the response of the pulp to the release of dentine-bound bioactive growth factors have highlighted that the pulp in mature teeth has a greater regenerative capacity than previously thought. Preserving all or part of the pulp is beneficial as it is less invasive than conventional root canal treatment. It retains the biological immune response and could help prevent infection of the periapical tissues. Recent correlations between histological findings and corresponding clinical signs, symptoms and tests can be used to carefully differentiate between different stages of reversible and irreversible pulpitis. In addition, it has become evident that if the correct vital pulp treatment is employed, pulp tissue previously diagnosed as irreversibly inflamed can at least be partially maintained. This highlights a problem with the existing diagnostic classification system in that the use of the term “irreversible” is misleading. Therefore, the aim of this communication is to both introduce a new way of diagnosing the various stages of pulpitis and also to relate the diagnosis to alternative minimal invasive treatment choices based on the degree of pulpal inflammation.

## **Aim:**

To introduce a new way of thinking about the inflamed pulp. We want to highlight that there is reversibly inflamed tissue in pulps that are currently diagnosed as irreversibly inflamed. This implies that the currently employed terminology may not reflect the actual inflammatory status of pulps evaluated clinically. We therefore propose and introduce a new diagnostic system with new terminology to highlight the healing potential of the pulp. This also implies that current treatment strategies are evaluated and revised to maintain pulp vitality with associated benefits.

## Introduction

In the majority of cases of mature teeth diagnosed with irreversible pulpitis or apical periodontitis root canal treatment is the therapy of choice in order to save the tooth. Inherent in this procedure is loss of dental hard tissue and subsequent weakening of the treated tooth, (Kishen 2006, Al-Omiri *et al.* 2010) making them more prone to fracture (Reeh *et al.* 1989, Al-Omiri *et al.* 2010). Irreversible pulp inflammation and apical periodontitis indicate a dental infectious disease related to the presence of microorganisms in and/or outside the root canal system (Haapasalo *et al.* 2011). To resolve apical periodontitis and more advanced pulpal disease the conventional treatment is removal of the complete pulp (root canal treatment) with the aim to reduce the number of bacteria in the root canal system that cause infection. However, cross-sectional research in the Netherlands has shown that around forty percent of endodontically treated teeth are associated with an apical radiolucency when examined using 2 dimensional dental radiographs (Peters *et al.* 2011), indicating failure of the procedure, as only a small proportion of apical radiolucencies remain visible as fibrotic healing scars (Nair *et al.* 1999, Love & Firth 2009). This trend is seen worldwide (Wu *et al.* 2009). Furthermore, endodontically treated teeth without visible radiographic signs of apical periodontitis can still be infected (Molander *et al.* 1998, Riccucci *et al.* 2014). Therefore, the actual failure rate of standard endodontic treatments performed in general practice is significantly higher than expected. Furthermore, these treatments are lengthy and costly and are often subject to retreatment (Figdor 2002). Less invasive alternative strategies could be used to treat pulpitis and increase the success of endodontic procedures beyond the improvement of the 'tools and gadgets' used during conventional root canal treatment.

As new insights in pulp biology have been gained, recent clinical research on vital pulp therapy now provide options for developing new biologically-driven treatment protocols (Aguilar *et al.* 2011, Simon *et al.* 2013, Tomson *et al.* 2016). Such treatment modalities have two huge advantages: firstly, pulp tissue is preserved, thus maintaining its physiological and defensive functions; secondly, less

hard tooth tissue will be removed which results in less weakening of the tooth. Combining knowledge of pulp biology with insight into why conventional therapies often fail stimulates a shift in thinking about endodontic treatment. Avoiding full pulpectomies (complete removal of the pulp to the apical constriction), where possible, could be the first step in improving treatment outcomes. A biological immune response from even a partially retained pulp could improve the treatment outcome by preventing infection of the apical area (Aguilar *et al.* 2011) and research has shown that vital pulp treatment results are comparable to conventional root canal therapy (Asgary *et al.* 2015).

### ***Dentine as a bioactive substance***

With increasing knowledge regarding the biological healing processes in response to infected carious dentine and pulp a new understanding of vital pulpal therapy emerges (Simon *et al.* 2011). Dentine is a vital, cellular tissue, containing the cellular processes of the odontoblasts that lay in the pulp. Therefore dentine and pulp must be considered together as a pulpo-dentinal complex (Pashley 1996). Recent research shows that the pulp is more resilient to significant microbial attacks than previously thought (Farges *et al.* 2013, Bjørndal *et al.* 2014, Cooper *et al.* 2014). Pulpal defense mechanisms to reduce the diffusion of microbes and microbial products towards the pulp include sclerosis of dentinal tubules and the formation of tertiary dentin (Bjørndal 2008). Apart from sclerosis and the replacement of dead odontoblasts, a host of growth factors including TGF- $\beta$ , ADM, IGF-1 /-2 are released from the pulpo-dentinal complex when dentine is demineralized during the progression of a carious lesion (Finkelman *et al.* 1990, Cassidy *et al.* 1997, Cooper *et al.* 2010, Cooper *et al.* 2011). These growth factors can have a positive effect on the pulpal response by enhancing the processes involved in pulp repair and regeneration (Smith *et al.* 2012, Smith *et al.* 2016). Ongoing research shows the impact of different growth factors encapsulated in dentin (Tomson *et al.* 2016). The fact that the regenerative potential of the pulpo-dentinal complex is evident in teeth with symptoms indicative of irreversible pulpitis indicates that the current classification of pulpitis may need to be revised (Ricucci *et al.* 2014). Probably cases traditionally deemed irreversible may in fact still be salvageable, thereby shifting the

balance of what was irreversible towards reversible, when the correct treatment is applied (Ricucci *et al.* 2014, Taha *et al.* 2015).

### ***Minimally invasive endodontics- 'Endolight'***

Traditionally it was thought that there is a poor relationship between clinical signs and symptoms and the histological state of the pulp in mature teeth (Selzer & Bender 1963, Garfunkel *et al.* 1973, Dummer *et al.* 1980), however, recently this was questioned and a histological study showed that there is good correlation between clinical symptoms of pulpitis and the corresponding histological state of a diseased pulp (Ricucci *et al.* in 2014). In cases with irreversible pulpitis the morphological changes indicating inflammation or necrosis were principally occurring in the coronal pulp whilst the radicular pulp was viable. This suggests that the radicular pulp could potentially be retained when a pulpotomy procedure is performed, thus preventing the need for a pulpectomy. This less invasive treatment approach ('Endolight') has the following advantages:

1. preservation of immunological functions and retaining structural integrity of the tooth.
2. simplifying treatment procedures and avoiding treatment complications associated with difficult root canal anatomy.
3. suggested procedures cause little pain (Simon *et al.* 2013).
4. reducing cost and inconvenience for patients and society.

Using vital pulp therapy, proper case selection and treatment protocols are essential if it is to be successful (Taha *et al.* 2015). Teeth exhibiting symptoms suggestive of irreversible pulpitis have little chance to revert to normal if no other intervention takes place than removal of irritants. In these cases the section of the pulp which is inflamed must be removed so that the remaining uninflamed tissue can recover and heal (Ricucci *et al.* 2014). This has proven to be successful and teeth

diagnosed with irreversible pulpitis have been successfully treated with a pulpotomy (Taha *et al.* 2015, Quedeimat *et al.* 2016).

If with the proper intervention, extensively inflamed pulps can be maintained this then begs the questions, should the term “irreversible” be used in our diagnostic criteria? As such a term condemns the pulp, resulting in pulpectomy or tooth extraction. Therefore as long as there is some uninfamed pulp tissue and the complete pulp has not become necrotic, this uninfamed vital tissue can be managed and retained. Such an approach would carry the advantages of those discussed above.

### ***Pulpitis- Symptom assessment and pulpal diagnosis- a new philosophy***

With the introduction of the ‘Endolight’ concept the authors propose a new diagnostic system of pulpitis and associated treatment options for how pulpal disease should be managed. In light of the information of the above mentioned recent studies, it becomes clear that it is time for traditional thinking and conventional root canal treatment procedures to be revisited. Caries progression in itself does not dictate treatment modalities but observed clinical symptoms are important in predicting pulpal conditions and therefore indicate the choice of treatment. Probably, many pulps diagnosed with irreversible pulpitis have the potential to heal after implementing the appropriate minimally invasive or ‘light’ treatments. This means that lingering pain after a stimulus, normally recognized as indicative for irreversible pulpitis, may not necessarily correspond to an irreversible state of inflammation of the entire pulp. Often only pulp tissue located in the pulp chamber is irreversibly inflamed if symptoms of prolonged lingering pain after cold/hot stimulus are present. Therefore, symptoms of pulpitis and pulpal diagnosis need to be considered carefully followed by appropriate intervention. Indirect pulp treatment (IPT) or coronal pulpotomy could be excellent less invasive alternative treatments which allows uninfamed pulp tissue in place to regenerate and heal (Asgary *et al.* 2014, Taha *et al.* 2015 ).

A recent positive development in pulpal diagnosis was the introduction of a new classification based on clinical symptoms (Hashem *et al.*, 2015). Hashem and co-workers classified pulpitis as:



= **mild reversible pulpitis**: patients' descriptions of sensitivity to hot, cold, and sweet lasting up to 15 to 20 s and settling spontaneously

= **severe reversible pulpitis**: increased pain for more than several minutes and needing oral analgesics

= **irreversible pulpitis**: persistent dull throbbing pain, sharp spontaneous pain, tenderness to percussion or pain exacerbated by lying down.

We propose to change the criteria for the clinical diagnosis of (ir)reversible pulpitis and suggest the following expansion of the diagnostic classification of pulpal inflammation and relate the diagnosis to minimally invasive treatments, whereby the extensively inflamed tissue is removed, leaving uninfamed vital rest tissue in place. This means that there is always vital pulp tissue that has the potential to heal if it is managed correctly.

#### **Our proposal for new clinical pulp diagnosis terminology and associated treatment modalities**

##### **1.       *Initial Pulpitis***

Heightened but not lengthened response to the cold test, not sensitive upon percussion and no spontaneous pain.

**Therapy:** IPT (van der Sluis *et al.* 2013, Asgary *et al.* 2015)

##### **2.       *Mild Pulpitis***

Heightened and lengthened reaction to cold, warmth and sweet stimuli that can last up to 20 seconds but then subsides, possibly percussion sensitive. According to the histological situation that fits these findings it would be implied that there is limited local inflammation confined to the crown pulp.

**Therapy:** IPT (van der Sluis *et al.* 2013, Asgary *et al.* 2015)

### 3. *Moderate Pulpitis*

Clear symptoms, strong, heightened and prolonged reaction to cold, which can last for minutes, possibly percussion sensitive and spontaneous dull pain that can be more or less suppressed with pain medication. According to the histological situation that fits these findings it would be implied that there is extensive local inflammation confined to the crown pulp.

**Therapy:** Coronal pulpotomy – partly/completely

### 4. *Severe Pulpitis*

Strong pain sensation, pain medication does not give much relief, clear pain reaction to warmth, sharp to dull pain, and the patient does not sleep anymore because of the pain (gets worse when lying down). Tooth is very sensitive to touch and percussion. According to the histological situation that fits these findings it would be implied that there is extensive local inflammation in the crown pulp that possibly extends into the root canals.

**Therapy:** Coronal pulpotomy- if there is no prolonged bleeding of pulp stumps in the orifices of the canals these will be covered with MTA in mature teeth, followed by restoration (Alqaderi *et al.* 2014). If one or more of the pulp stumps keeps bleeding after rinsing with 2ml NaOCl 2% a short pulpotomy can be carried out whereby more inflamed tissue is removed from the canal till about 3-4mm from the roentgenologic apex. If bleeding ceases then the vital short stumps is plugged with gutta percha and cement at this working length. If bleeding persists a full pulpectomy needs to be performed in order to remove all inflamed tissue from the canal (Matsuo *et al.* 1996).

Recapitulating: 'Endo-Light', the minimal invasive endodontic approach' can benefit dental health care on several aspects:

= maintaining the viability of the pulp as long as possible to induce a biological response to prevent apical periodontitis and improving the success rate of vital pulp treatment

= saving tooth structure and consequently increasing tooth survival

= saving time and cost for both the patient and/or society

= reducing pain and discomfort for the patient with these less invasive treatments and keeping teeth longer functional

If endodontic treatment fails the following alternatives can be considered: endodontic retreatment, apical surgery or extraction.

## **Conclusion**

Vital pulp treatment has been shown to be highly successful if the intervention has been performed with the accompanying clinical symptoms as a guideline. There is good correlation between clinical symptoms of pulpitis and the corresponding histological state of an inflamed pulp. This information, together with the pretreatment and mid operative clinical findings, can be used to potentially save and retain pulp and tooth tissue with associated benefits. Developments in our understanding of pulp biology and the response of the pulp to the release of dentine-bound bioactive growth factors have made it clear that the pulp has substantial regenerative capabilities and that inflammation is a normal part of the healing response of the pulp. Vital pulp tissue that has been managed properly is quite resilient and a diseased pulp can heal if most of the inflamed/necrotic tissue is removed. This gives the remaining tissue a chance to recover. The authors hope that with the proposition of a new system for diagnosing different stages of pulpitis, using associated symptoms and implementing new minimally invasive treatment strategies, new debate and research in the area of vital pulp treatment will be stimulated with improvement in treatment results for patients in the future.

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